

Article

The Contours of State Retreat from Collaborative Environmental Governance under Austerity

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Abstract: Although the effects of public austerity have been the subject of a significant literature in recent years, the changing role of the state as a partner in collaborative environmental governance under austerity has received less attention. By employing theories of collaborative governance and state retreat, this paper used a qualitative research design comprised of thirty-two semi-structured interviews within the case study UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in the United Kingdom to address this lacuna. Participants perceived that the austerity period has precipitated negative changes to their extant state-orientated funding regime, which had compelled changes to their organisational structure. Austerity damaged their relationships with the state and perceptions of state legitimacy whilst simultaneously strengthening and straining the relationships between intra-partnership non-state governance actors. This case offers a critical contemporary reflection on normative collaborative environmental governance theory under austerity programmes. These open up questions about the role of the state in wider sustainability transitions.

Keywords: state transformation; UNESCO biosphere reserve; North Devon biosphere reserve; UK; state funding; landscape partnership; marketisation

1. Introduction

The global financial crisis of 2008 was one of the most profound global economic shocks of the last century. The United Kingdom (UK) was particularly exposed to this crisis [1]. Similarly, to other governments, the UK responded to this crisis by institutionalising a programme of domestic austerity [2–7] including public sector spending, rationalisation of public sector departments, and a widespread public reform agenda to drive greater cost savings and efficiencies [8]. There is a significant literature drawing attention to how austerity programmes, such as in the UK, also increase exposure of state agencies and beneficiaries to enhanced market forces and forms [8–10] such as competition and tendering, under the guise of increasing marketisation. Whilst there have been many scholarly contributions seeking to understand national-scale austerity programmes [1–3] and their effects on discrete policy fields [11–14], there have been fewer investigations into its impacts on public provision for the environment (but see [15–17]). Though this limited environment/austerity literature has tended to focus on how austerity programmes affect the role of the state in environmental policy making [15,17–19], none have yet investigated how austerity programmes have affected the role of the state in environmental governance activities. This paper addresses this lacuna by examining the impacts of austerity on environmental governance through the lens of state retreat theory and the normative logic of collaborative governance theory. In so doing, it asks the question:

“How has collaborative environmental governance been effected by state retreat under austerity?”

Considering that governance through collaborative partnerships is one of the foundation stones of contemporary normative environmental governance theory, this research makes both a salient and timely contribution. The following section conceptualises the impact of austerity and the two theoretical notions employed. It then specifies the research design, methods, and findings. The subsequent section combines results and discussions around the three substantive narratives that emerged from the data. A final concluding section draws on the key implications of the research findings.

Conceptualising the Impact of Austerity

This paper first engages with the notion of governance. This concept denotes an open, inclusive and collaborative form of governing by the state through networks and partnerships of public, private and third-sector stakeholders engaged in processes of governing by negotiation and discourse [20]. Due to the increasing complexity and interdisciplinarity of environmental management, governance through plural networks has become the dominant contemporary conceptualisation for management of the natural environment [21]. Successful environmental governance is argued to be intrinsically collaborative [21] and predicated upon the key characteristics of (1) trust, (2) shared mission, (3) discourse, and (4) commitment [22–24]. Trust in this context relates to a belief in the reliability, truth or abilities of other governance partners; the sense that partners have a mission orientation that is well aligned strategically and practically, that they make decisions based upon discussion and effective communication; and that partners evidence commitment to the governance instruction to which they are partner. Governance based on these values and characteristics is increasingly considered a normative element of political theory [25–27] and the dominant organising modality for places of both greater and lesser degrees of public protection (see [21,27–29]). However, the literature does tend towards prioritising governance’s conceptual and explanatory value for designated and protected sites (e.g., [30–33]). This is due to the greater influence of the ‘public’ in these spaces, and their desire for institutionalising collaboration [34], plurality [35] and openness [28] in decision making.

Normative environmental governance theory places ‘the state’ (by ‘the state’, we refer to the national-scale governmental departments and non-governmental (or quasi-governmental) agencies) as a critical partner in effective collaborative environmental governance. This is due to the mixed private–public–voluntary ownership regimes of protected natural environments, and the attendant requirements for stakeholder engagement in environmental management decision making [36]. Whilst there is a small literature accounting for the effects of austerity programmes on governance modalities [37,38], there is little exploring its effects on environmental governance [39]. These are important if the full implications of austerity programmes on the national natural environments are going to be understood. Moreover, if the state is going to be an engaged and active partner in wider societal sustainability transitions [40–42], understanding how the austerity period has affected its abilities to engage in collaborative environmental governance appears salient. An existing literature has noted how the theory of ‘state retreat’ [26,43–45] might offer a conceptual framing for understanding the consequences of austerity on environmental governance.

State retreat is a grand concept at the intersection of political science and international relations, but one that seeks to transcend these disciplinary boundaries [46,47]. It diagnoses the contemporary condition of globalised international relations [26] as one where state power and authority is in decline [47] relative to markets, transnational institutions, and lower levels of governance. It understands this state retreat in terms of the key characteristics of (1) a decline in the authority of the state coupled to (2) an increase in authority of private non-state actors in governance and (3) a parcelling of power away from the state to smaller geographic territories and entities [46]. A key differentiation can be drawn between state retreat as a macro-scale political phenomenon [47] and state retreat at national meso-scales of political and governance activity [26]. It has been argued that ‘state retreat’ offers a rational theoretical explanation of the consequences of national state austerity programmes on socio-ecological partnerships operating under governance modalities [47]. State retreat has been described as a multi-dimensional diminution of the state from (what is often considered)

normative positionality, forms, and substance in collaborative governance, towards more basic forms and substance of engagement [48]. This can include state withdrawal from governance fora and decision-making processes [27,42], moving away from the ‘collaboration ethic’ implicit in normative governance theory [49] and, ultimately, ‘rescaling’ the role of the state in governance [25,43,50]. Thus, state retreat represents both a withdrawal from the intellectual life of collaborative governance as well as the practical activities of governance. At the micro-scale of environmental governance, it has been argued [18,22] that state retreat is creating a vacuum that has led to the diminishment of governance fora and the fragmentation of governance activities [24], but has also opened opportunities for new actors to take more prominent leadership [51] and business-partnering roles [22]. It has been further argued that governance, as an organisational modality, is both a response to the increasing complexities of government under globalisation [25] but also to the changing nature of the state in retreat [46,47]: where the state withdraws from governing, plural governance replaces it. That said, other literature has contested the notion of state retreat, critiquing the negative connotations of ‘retreat’ as opposed to state ‘transformation’ [52] or re-scaling [26,53].

2. Materials and Methods

Understanding the detailed nuances of social characteristics, such as trust, commitment and discursiveness (amongst others), implied a qualitative research design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews that allowed for a consistent and critical thematic structure with sufficient opportunities for participant-led discourse. Data were collected within a single case study governance partnership in an English biosphere reserve (see below).

In total, thirty-two interviews were conducted in the studied biosphere reserve partnership during the summer of 2016. The interview participants represented a wide range of different roles, grades, and sectoral interests (an interview code is used henceforth to describe each of these participants—each is labelled and described as ‘Participant X’, where X is their unique identifier that corresponds to their place in the anonymised interview schedule; see Appendix A), which were used to differentiate participant responses during the analysis. Interviews were conducted face to face via an audio recorder, transcribed, and analysed using NVivo 11. Interview transcripts were initially coded thematically based upon a preset and node framework informed by the literature, the key characteristics of state retreat and governance theory, and the research question. These were iteratively re-coded against emergent nodes as new understandings about the dialectic relationship between question and data emerged from the transcripts [54].

Case Selection and Description

We selected the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) biosphere reserve in North Devon in the UK for our case study. Similarly to other international biosphere reserves, this case study can be differentiated from other nationally designated sites of conservation and sustainable development activity based on its specific legal framework beyond the broad UNESCO designation [55–57]. It places a particular emphasis on partnering [56] rather than statutory roles, and therefore sheds light on the impact on the many non-statutory environmental governance relationships.

UNESCO considers biosphere reserves as place-based ‘living laboratories’ for environmental governance innovation [56], best practice [57], and evaluation [58]. They are conceived as both typical of normative environmental governance configurations yet also offering unique place-based cases with the potential for exploratory research [57]. The global network of 686 UNESCO biosphere reserves is predominately financed through various mechanisms by their host national government. The governance configurations in biosphere reserves are not just typical of each other and the wider global network of six hundred and sixty-nine biosphere reserves, but of ‘Western’ environmental governance partnerships in general. It is typical of other UK biosphere reserves, inasmuch as it operates under similar multi-level policy, legal, and funding conditions; and has no statutory basis in legislation

and receives no statutory core funding from the state. Much like other biosphere reserves [56,57], the case study area historically benefitted from forms of discretionary support and benefits from powerful public actors. State actors supported the broad mission and approach of the biosphere partnership, and provided direct support through funding and giving access to information, such as in relation to other funding opportunities.

The delivery of the strategic objectives of this biosphere reserve are served by a small executive team, supported by a partnership of un-paid governance actors with backgrounds in conservation, local government, national public agencies, rural arts, land management, and tourism.

As Figure 1 shows, the case study is situated in the northern quarter of the English county of Devon and is constituted by the catchments of the rivers Taw and Torridge. The county of Devon operates a two-tier system of local government comprised of the upper tier Devon County Council (DCC) and lower tier district-scale councils (e.g., municipality scale)—three of which (Torridge District Council, North Devon District Council and West Devon Borough Council) have territory in the biosphere reserve. Before the austerity period, the case study biosphere reserve was maintained through discretionary and in-kind county and municipal-scale government funding, supplemented by occasional national and county-scale project funding (and charitable giving). These funds allowed the biosphere reserve to undertake its UNESCO-mandated environmental management activities and support its collaborative governance fora—the biosphere reserve partnership. This partnership comprises a group of over thirty organisations and stakeholders voluntarily offering time and inputs to collaboratively influence sustainable environmental governance in the North Devon site. In the interests of maximising limited opportunities and spreading risk, the biosphere reserve (and partnership) historically drew on different forms of political support and funding from across three scales of the state. The organisations that comprised its governance partnership exhibited moderate levels of state grant dependency [34].

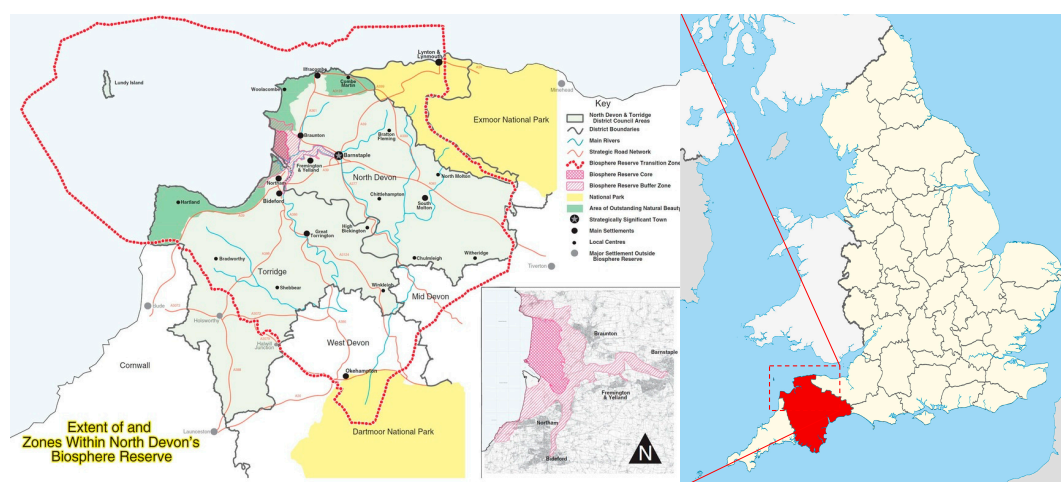


Figure 1. The North Devon UNESCO biosphere reserve. Source: North Devon UNESCO biosphere reserve, 2016 [56].

3. Results

3.1. Pre-Austerity

Iterative analysis of the interview transcripts discerned three interrelated and partially sequential discourses of response to questioning around the research question. Each of these discourses is set out in sections below and then discussed in relation to the two theoretical frames. Direct quotations about these three thematic discourses were selected opportunistically from the transcripts. Initially, it should be noted that the whole cohort of participants offering a range of perspectives about the nature the biosphere reserve partnership before the austerity period. These perspectives are included to aid comparative discussion and conclusion drawing.

Twenty participants commented on the relative security of funding the biosphere reserve received from the county-scale state actors in the pre-austerity period, and eighteen participants commented on discretionary in-kind support from district-scale actors and agents. Seven participants, all from voluntary organisations, noted the annual value for discretionary, in-kind and project funding from state actors pre-austerity. Thirteen participants from voluntary organisations (n=12) perceived that, pre-austerity, they had enjoyed a good level of access to information on potential future funding from public agencies.

There was also a high degree of unanimity amongst participants (n=23) about the broadly collaborative, equal and inclusive nature of the biosphere reserve's organisation and decision-making processes in the pre-austerity period. A majority (n=18) considered that whilst there was always a degree of dynamic tension between those who should lead and follow in decision making, this was largely managed through the partnership's decision-making fora which was organised as a 'democratic committee' (P3) where partnership members enjoyed a degree of equality in legitimacy and decision making. Six participants perceived that the biosphere reserve had initially coalesced as a 'coalition of the willing' (P3) based on existing relationships between organisations in North Devon with shared mission, aligned values, and the social capital that comes from working together over long periods. Three participants argued that this reinforced a collaborative culture, and minimised the potential for intra-partnership competitions for scarce funding.

A mix of eight participants from voluntary (n=6) and public sector (n=2) roles perceived that, pre-austerity, the biosphere partnership members and state agency actors considered each other equal and legitimate partners in the governance of the North Devon biosphere reserve. Some suggested that the balance of powers within the state-biosphere reserve relationship waxed and waned through time in response to external pressures and imperatives; though seven participants suggested that this balance had enjoyed a degree of equilibrium for 'the last ten or-so years' (P35) before austerity.

3.2. Funding

The first discourse that emerged from the interviews related to how the austerity period had precipitated changes in the biosphere reserves funding regime from all levels of the state. A majority of interviewees (30 from 32) considered that austerity had affected the visibility, value and nature of the funding it received from the state. The significant majority of participants (n=23) perceived that the austerity period had seen a gradual disassociation from public partners in the intellectual and practical governance of the biosphere reserve, though four participants considered that the Environment Agency representative had tried to stay engaged. Participants suggested that as the state slowly disassociated from the biosphere reserve partnership, their established funding regime became increasingly problematic.

Nine participants from voluntary organisations suggested austerity had noticeably reduced the regularity of grant and project funding opportunities from national agencies. Fifteen participants further noted how assumptions of institutional per annum funding expectations had been reduced through the austerity period, such as when Participant Twenty-Eight commented that:

"well ... once we could count on getting X every year, but now we only really get Y or less than that".

Participant Twelve commented on how, whereas, pre-austerity, they might have expected to identify six to seven state-agency led funding opportunities in a year, this was now halved (e.g., 3–4).

Ten participants from a mix of voluntary (n=8) and public (n=2) backgrounds commented on the increasingly politicised nature of funding, where it tended to be increasingly tied to specific agency-mandated agenda and approaches. For example, Participant Twenty-Two suggested that:

"funding always reflected Defra priorities, we've just noticed that this has become more of a thing, with fewer opportunities for us to have a say".

Six participants ruminated on how public grant funding had always been partially tied to government policy agenda and three participants commented on how the nature of public grant

dependency carried inherent risks of changing political priorities. Nevertheless, seven participants argued that the austerity period had sharpened the contingent aspects of national-scale funding, with an increased preference for funding tied to politically salient projects, such as the comment by a senior manager in an ecology-based voluntary organisation (P7) that:

“so much of the policy we see now, such as the natural capital approach we’ve already discussed, are led by political interests”.

Twenty-eight participants from a mix of public (n=4), voluntary (n=23) and independent (n=1) roles discussed the diminishing total value of discretionary and project funding from national-scale agencies. This diminishing trajectory was characterised in terms of reduced funding opportunities, the total value of funding, and an increasing pressure towards market-based activities and forms (e.g., marketisation) through which they could access funding opportunities. National-scale project funding opportunities were discerned to be increasingly aligned to politically motivated agenda and forms and processes that were market and competition-orientated. Seven participants (all voluntary) noted how reductions in regularity and total values of funding opportunities were often explained by their national-scale public partners with apologies, empathies, and promises of solidarity. They were often accompanied by rationalisations about the funding cuts that they (national-scale actors) too had been subject to. Austerity was often described to them by public partners as a cascading series of funding reductions, as Participant Nine described:

“as Defra get cut, so do we, and that all rolls downhill to the projects we used to support”.

These national-scale state actors still considered their role in collaborative governance fora and networks to be important, and so this situation (e.g., funding cuts) was problematic. They considered that the state was still important for providing high-level support to the biosphere reserve, but also in providing a degree of plurality in decision making, as seen in the comment by a middle manager in a public agency (P14) who suggested that:

“if management decisions in the biosphere are going to continue to try and represent all the people that live here then we need to keep being at the heart of this”.

Participants also noted how the austerity period had changed discretionary and project funding from DCC. This was noted in terms of (1) changes to the overall amounts of discretionary, (2) the avenues through which they could access funding, and (3) the conditionalities for using funding. They problematised changes in funding from DCC in three ways—how much funding was actually available; the increasing difficulty and time burden required to access funding; and the pre-conditions attached to funding sources. Two interviewees in senior roles volunteered the context that no English biosphere reserves received any discretionary funding from UK government, and instead now relied entirely funding from county-scale public actors. Four participants defended DCC discretionary funding to the biosphere in terms of the ‘public support for the public good’ (P3), with P19, a former senior member of the biosphere team, going so far as to suggest:

“we’re never going to get to real sustainability unless some public funds are put up”.

Six participants expressed how this deterioration in funding was negatively impacting on the biosphere reserve’s ability to maintain staff numbers and deliver its functions, such as Participant Fifteen, a voluntary sector middle manager in the field of heritage and landscape who commented that:

“There are impacts – XXXXX and his team can’t keep doing what they do . . . with funding continually reducing year on year”.

Eight participants from a mix of voluntary (n=7) and public roles (n=1) commented on how austerity had also affected funding from DCC which had moved to standalone funding allocations tied to specific projects and outputs. They were keen to highlight how project funding was a far

smaller proportion of the financial support gained from DCC compared to non-tied discretionary funding. That said, participants expressed how DCC project funding during the austerity period were increasingly ‘sporadic’ (P3), ‘all over the place’ (P9), and ‘about short-term outcomes’ (P31). Interviewees problematised these changes due to their impact on the biosphere reserve’s ability to deliver its long-term programmes and UNESCO-mandated interventions and management activities. Three participants noted that DCC had been broadly open and communicative about these changes. Two participants noted how considering the lack of clarity that DCC had in terms of their annual block grant reductions from UK government, they had been honest about where they would have to make reductions in discretionary and project funding. Where DCC had visibility of impending reductions, they had informed the partnership, giving them the time to identify potential alternative funding opportunities (from charitable giving—P3) and impetus to facilitate change (cutting costs—P7; re-organisation—P20).

Twelve participants noted how austerity had also precipitated an erosion of discretionary in-kind support from municipality-scale actors. This meant fewer offers of office space to host meetings and fewer offers of in-kind support on projects. Seven participants commented on how they were also less likely to benefit from in-kind support from individual bureaucrats who were retreating away from discretionary activities to delivering their core statutory, defensible, and accountable services. Ten participants perceived that the greatest reductions in total funding and support had come from the in-kind support they had previously enjoyed at the municipality-scale. Interestingly, five participants noted how they perceived that public agencies/actors at the municipality-scale were also less likely to have tried to change the terms and conditions through which they would offer what limited funding or in-kind support that they could. As Participant Ten commented:

“Torridge district council kept trying to offer support where they could, even when they were being cut back to the bone themselves”.

3.3. Governance Structure

The second discourse to emerge from the interviews related to how the funding changes (discussed above) had compelled the biosphere reserve to change its organisational structure to reflect a new funding landscape. Twenty-one interviewees offered comments on how and why the biosphere reserve had responded to the austerity with organisational changes. A significant proportion of responding comments (19 of 21) suggested that the austerity period had increasingly marketised the funding landscape from which the biosphere reserve drew support. In turn, they had responded with organisational changes that would increase their agility in identifying and securing scarce project funding opportunities, whilst also rationalising executive and partnership roles to reduce organisational costs.

Thirteen participants in the public (n-6) and voluntary (n-7) sectors perceived that whilst this was a reaction to austerity, the changes were made proactively to accentuate the existing strengths of the partnership, and endeavoured to reflect and maintain the sense of shared mission across the partnership members. Six participants suggested that the changes in the regularity and forward visibility of project funding opportunities (coupled to the near total reduction in discretionary funding) necessitated a movement away from whole partnership meetings as the primary decision-making venues. This saw an evolution into a structure that facilitated enhanced agility and efficiency in decision making and for securing scarce project funding. Two of these participants (P9, P21) discussed how the new organisational structure traded off collective partnership decision making for executive commercial and project decision making.

Participant Nine suggested that austerity had precipitated a realignment from an inclusive and diverse decision-making structure towards a more stratified and commercially agile structure. Participant five suggested that this represented an evolution of the pre-austerity organisational values towards ‘new’ values of agility, decisiveness, and commercial decision making. They further suggested (along with three other participant comments) that these values were reflected in changes to the organisational decision-making structures. This was an evolution from a relatively flat but thematically

separated organisational decision-making structure towards a spoke-and-hub structure, as visualised in Figure 2. Within this visualisation, the thematic ‘spoke’ groups (that correlate to UNESCO thematic priority areas) are labelled, along with the number of representatives-interview participants in each of these groups (given in brackets).

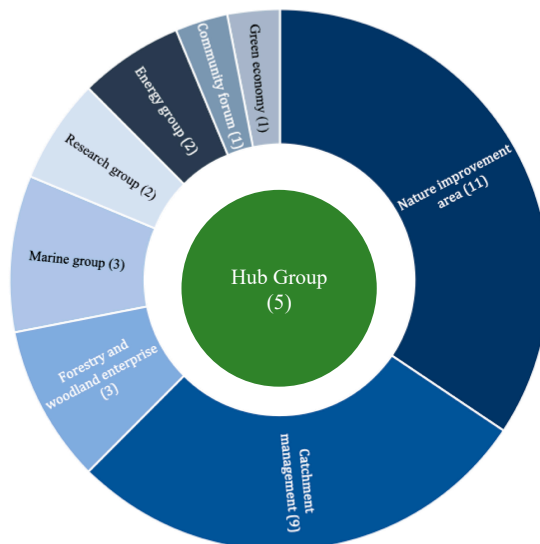


Figure 2. Current biosphere reserve partnership governance structure.

The aim of this reconfigured governance construct was to maximise the opportunities for the inner ‘hub’ to identify and respond with agility to new project funding opportunities when they arose, and to manage the strategic decision making of the biosphere reserve. Five participants in senior roles noted that the challenge presented by the increasing marketisation of the austerity period was to increase their organisational agility and responsiveness, whilst continuing to honour the complexity, multi-disciplinarity and egalitarianism inherent in their UNESCO delivery remit. Six participants of mixed roles and grades argued that this new spoke and hub model held the promise of increasing agility whilst maintaining the discursive avenues key to collaborative governance. Three others argued that, while it might meet these twin criteria, it came at the potential cost of the value of full partnership participation in actual deliberative decision making; a trade off that three voluntary-sector participants were particularly wary about. They argued that pre-austerity partnership members had skills and capabilities to undertake any and all roles. The changes wrought by austerity had led to most members specialising as leaders, decision makers or management deliverers. As the senior member of the hub group, P29, noted:

“I don’t really spend much biosphere time doing project work anymore . . . it’s pretty much all taken up with responding to funding calls and the like”.

Six participants commented on how, despite this reorganisation, disparities remained in the number of individuals that comprised each of the ‘outer’ thematic clusters. That said, the changes had nevertheless led to a new streamlined inner core representing each of the thematic areas, along with representatives from the biosphere reserve executive and board, in strategic and operational decision making. Twelve participants expressed concern that this reconfiguration might yet be detrimental to their delivery of UNESCO-designated activities. Ten participants, from mixed roles and levels of seniority considered that rather than driving greater organisational efficiency, this might reduce their effectiveness by compelling them to spend excessive time and resources on identifying and securing project funding. Seven participants considered how the processes of *specialising* in the interests of driving greater efficiency and agility might represent a wider existential transition from being a delivery-focused partnership to a competition-orientated institution. A majority of interviewees with

this opinion, all from voluntary backgrounds (n-3), considered that this change was a necessary price for what Participant 18 considered ‘surviving austerity’. On the other hand, four other participants (all voluntary roles) considered that the organisational change represented a risk to the core purposes of the UNESCO programme by precipitating partnership structural and value changes away from collaborative good governance.

3.4. Relationships

A large number of participants (n-18) considered that the evolving nature of funding and the biosphere reserve’s organisational responses to these were considered to be having a detrimental impact on the biosphere reserve’s relationship with state actors, and the partners’ relationships with each other. Seven participants from mixed roles and seniorities noted that the changing positionalities of public agencies as the ‘gatekeepers picking the winners’ (P5) of increasingly scarce monies between collaborative/competitive partners was introducing an increasing distance between the state agencies and the other members of biosphere reserve partnership. For example, P3 suggested that:

“we aren’t really as close as pre-2010. Once they (unnamed organisation) came to meetings, they contributed, now it’s different”.

Five participants in voluntary roles gave opinions on how the biosphere reserves’ relationship with state agencies was evolving from being a plural partner to a more stratified relationship, and that this was damaging the ‘differentiated but different’ (P12) collaborative nature of the partnership. Three participants questioned if the marketisation dynamic was fundamentally and diametrically opposed to the ‘collaborative’ aspirations of environmental governance. Three other participants ruminated on how the combination of austerity and marketisation was anathema to collaboration by compelling (former) collaborators towards self-seeking competitive behaviours for ever-diminishing project funding.

Seventeen participants, from all sectoral backgrounds and seniorities (voluntary-10, public-6, independent-1), perceived that the austerity period had affected the nature of the relationships between all the other (non-governmental) members of biosphere reserve partnership. They expressed concern about how it had changed how partnership organisations individually and collectively accessed and benefitted from public funding. Those members with commercial purposes and considerations were increasingly focused on competing for the same funding opportunities. Six interviewees noted how this had markedly strained relationships between three different sets of partner organisations, and had generally exerted a corrosive influence on the social bonds that tied the partnership.

As with the changing nature of funding, Participants Ten and Twenty-eight, middle managers in public environmental agencies, expressed both regret and acceptance about the evolving nature of their relationship with the biosphere reserve partnership. Despite these expressed reservations, they (and Participant Fourteen) suggested that the austerity agenda was forcing unpleasant rationalisations of funding across all levels of governance:

“no one wants to stop attending the biosphere reserve meetings or spending less energy on the nitty gritty of working in north Devon, but the drum beat for doing more with less is remorseless”.

These participants expressed that it was the organisational mission of national public agencies to become more embedded in environmental governance in the biosphere reserve. They rationalised that an increased focus on competition for scarce resources at least allowed for degrees of impartiality in the allocation of diminishing funding, but accepted that it might lead to unacceptable cultural shifts in the collaborative nature (and ethic) of environmental governance. For example, Participant Ten who mentioned the ‘unintended consequences’ of their responses to austerity. Four national and county-scale public sector participants of mixed grades considered that their gradual disassociation from the biosphere was predicated upon changes in their positionality as the gatekeepers of scarce funding, and that this might have implications on their integratedness and ‘governing by consent’ (P3). Participant Ten described this in terms of how ‘discussions at meetings were taking on new edges’, or as

Participant Twenty-Eight considered ‘austerity has forced us to choose between being the governed or the governor’. Participant Thirty noted how this situation was also likely to have effects on the perceptions of their legitimacy as genuine partners and experts. Indeed, nine different participants, all from small- to micro-scale organisations, discussed the erosion of legitimacy they felt towards state agencies that had come through the austerity period. More than half (n=5) of these considered that disassociation from place-based and co-produced environmental governance knowledge damaged their wider perceptions of agency legitimacy. Three participants noted how this distance reduced opportunities for vertical and reciprocal communication and knowledge sharing towards co-production. Four participants considered that the funding priorities of government agencies were now instead more likely orientated towards political and marketised environmental governance agenda. Participant Eighteen suggested that:

“Every new funding call seems to go further and further away from what we want to do, and what we know is right for here”.

Two senior public Participants suggested this ‘distancing’ was purposeful and, as Participant Thirty noted, was aimed to reducing ‘the risk of introducing the perception of favouritism’, congruent with their enhanced role as gatekeepers of scarce funding.

4. Discussion

The interview data offered significant insights into how the austerity period had affected the biosphere reserve. The degree to which these data correlated with, and could be explained by, the two theoretical lenses will be discussed next.

4.1. Collaborative Governance

The initial decision to use collaborative governance as the theoretical framing was validated where the findings offered insights about the key characteristics [24] of trust, dialogue, shared mission and commitment to the biosphere reserve.

Participants discussed how intra-partnership trust had been eroded by the austerity period. There was the perception that some state governance partners were becoming unreliable in their support of the biosphere reserve, and increasingly unwilling to engage. Moreover, in a few cases, there was a sense that national partners were becoming less open about the terms and natures of funding opportunities. They also perceived an erosion in the sense of trust between members of partnership driven by scarcity (of funding) and increasing competitive pressures [59].

Participants expressed a sense of declining ‘shared mission’ with state partners but, for some, this was leading to an increased sense of shared mission with other non-state governance partners. Indeed, the perceived changes to funding allocation, access, and general scarcity of funding was discussed by some middle-grade participants as a driver of greater cohesion on the biosphere reserve’s UNESCO mission. However, this sense of increasing ‘shared mission’ was less likely to be shared by senior-grade participants who instead tended towards focusing on the negative consequences of the funding changes on their intra-partnership sense of shared mission; which chimes with other contributions evidencing that austerity can enhance intra-group solidarities [50,60]. The enhanced perception of shared mission was credited with bringing non-managerial members closer together, and making them more likely to express that the biosphere reserve had value as an institution that transcended their own organisations. In contrast, responding senior managers tended to express the perception that austerity was driving a greater mandate for organisational survival that trumped a sense of shared mission to the biosphere reserve [51].

A small majority of the total cohort (n=17) considered that the austerity period had been detrimental to their abilities to have open and collaborative dialogues with state actors and agencies. Eight participants from ecology-based backgrounds (see Appendix A) noted that this coincided with a pronounced diminution in opportunities for vertical dialogue between them and

state actors on problematic issues and opportunities. This suggested that austerity may have particularly diminished communicative opportunities for ecology knowledge and challenges to former partners in state agencies [51]. The majority considered the pre-austerity biosphere reserve partnership a valuable discursive space that was highly reflexive to changing needs of environmental management [61]. Certainly, the turn towards spoke-and-hub organisational modality evidenced the intrinsic organisational reflexivity [62], though the mid-term consequences of this change upon their reflexivity of governance remained a contested issue amongst participants. Austerity has been found to impact negatively upon discursive governance spaces [6,63,64], though this research discerned a tension where austerity was instead precipitating change towards new organisational modalities that instead favoured commercial reflexivity [51] at the costs of discursive capacities and values [63]. This was a tension between austerity-induced marketisation of collaborative environmental governance structures, and the extant governance and management values of collaborative decision making and discursiveness (see [21]). This poses the question whether austerity-induced marketisation leads to the diminishment of discursivity in collaborative environmental governance?

There was a clear dialogue running through the interview discourse that the austerity period had exposed the partial and contingent commitment that state and actors had towards the biosphere reserve as an institution and as a group of organisations striving for a shared mission. In stark contrast, there was another counter dialogue from predominately middle-grade participants about how this had in turn increased the commitment that the other non-state members of the biosphere reserve felt towards its mission and each other. However, underneath these comments about commitment and solidarity, the increasingly difficult funding environment was evidently straining individual organisation's ability to commit to each other through increasing competitive forces. Instead a form of contingent commitment was evident in senior managers, who expressed commitment to the concept of the biosphere reserve partnership—so long as the financial viability of their organisation remained had primacy. This created a juxtaposition between senior managers in governance organisations who valued the biosphere reserve less than their own organisations and senior public sector participants who also expressed a sense of value towards the biosphere reserve but could not help the distance being introduced to their relationship. In contrast, non-senior participants both expressed a sense of value in the biosphere reserve and a clarifying sense of mission towards its continuation.

4.2. State Retreat

Participants in this case expressed how the austerity period was affecting their form of partnership governance in ways that were also congruent with the theory of 'state retreat' [33–35]. Comments were offered which discussed the declining (1) involvement, (2) authority and (3) legitimacy of state agencies and actors in collaborative governance. The findings related to 'relationships' and highlighted how they broadly considered them to have withdrawn from both the intellectual activities of governance in the biosphere reserve but also from its collaborative ethics [24,49]. The distancing of these agencies and actors [17] from the governance fora, decision making, and co-production [27,42] as they realigned towards new positionalities [25,50] as the gatekeepers of scarce austerity funding correlates with state retreat theory's [43] notion of declining state authority. That said, other participants expressed how austerity was not so much a retreat as transformative period [50,52]. They considered that state agencies and actors were re-centralising the power over framing which environmental priorities and issues needed funding, and then better directing the processes through which these priorities should be addressed. Austerity represented less of a state in retreat as an ascendant state re-asserting its control over how and on what funding is spent. Others went further by suggesting that this re-centralisation of the state was in response to the diminution of state power seen under the governance agenda [21], whereby state decision-framing and decision-making power had been leached away to a plurality of governance stakeholders [29]. A broad and diverse group of five interviewees instead suggested that the UK austerity programme might also represent a re-assertion of the state power, wielded through

funding, to set the agenda and priorities for environmental governance based on political agenda rather than governance stakeholder agenda.

State retreat also theorises about reciprocal increases in the authority of private non-state actors. There was some evidence found that the ‘vacuum’ [25,27] created by the retreat of the state as a delivery partner was being filled by other non-state actors. Many considered that the withdrawal of state partners from the intellectual and practical experience of governance reduced their legitimacy to lead [36] and make decisions. Some considered that this deauthorisation of state actors in turn reauthorised and legitimised existing governance partners. That said, a greater number considered that the positioning of these agencies as monocratic gatekeepers of funding actually reduced the authority of all other governance partners. This finding runs counter to state retreat theory [47] and suggests that any diminution of state activity in governance was not coupled to an aggregate loss of state authority [46]. Instead, by recentralising and restricting access to scarce funding, the austerity period had acted to increase the power and, through it, authority of state actors in governance. This finding supports the counterarguments against Strange’s theory [47] that the state is not in fact in ‘retreat’, but is ‘transforming’ [52], and perhaps rowing back on the normative logics of plural and open governance [21,24].

The third dimension of state retreat theory considers the parcelling down of powers from the state to lower scales of governance and territories. From one perspective, this was evident in this study, where participants discussed how the disassociation of state agencies and actors from governance fora had facilitated their ability to make decisions based solely on the interests of the biosphere reserve. They argued that this allowed true biosphere-centric planning and decision making, though a greater number considered that austerity had reduced their power at the local scale [17,43]. Certainly, the localism literature discusses how for some local-scale governance actors, austerity has seen an increase in decision-making and budgetary powers [18,41]. That said, the findings did not touch upon the localism agenda, suggesting that this was not a subject participant’s associated with austerity or the effects of it. The evidence from this case study does, however, suggest that for designations with limited statutory authority [56,57], national austerity programmes tended not to endow them with greater powers parcelling down from the state.

5. Conclusions

The principal findings of this paper revealed that the austerity period and its associated changes in the extant funding regimes changed the role of the state in collaborative environmental governance within a case study English biosphere reserve. Individual partnership stakeholders expressed negative perceptions about the role of the state as a collaborative partner and patron. Although their trust in each other was also affected, this was simultaneously reinforced by an increasing sense of intra-partnership shared mission in non-senior managers. Whilst vertical dialogue with state agencies had been negatively affected by this period, horizontal dialogue between partnership members had been somewhat enhanced through organisational structural reforms, though at the potential loss of collaborative decision making. The mid- to longer-term consequences of the organisational restructuring and tensions between delivery and commercial reflexivity are a point for further research.

State retreat theory was found to offer a partially effective theoretical frame where it accounted for the declining involvement in intellectual and operational actions of governance by state actors. However, the perceived deauthorisation of the biosphere reserve and reauthorisation of the state was suggestive of a dynamic more akin to the state in ‘transformation’ rather than in ‘retreat’. This misalignment with state retreat theory continued in the third characterisation, where little of the ‘parcelling down of power’ was witnessed—though, conceivably, the localism agenda that ran concurrently with austerity in the UK might account for this dynamic. The overall conclusion was that, whilst the austerity period had precipitated dynamics that could be accounted for within meso-scale state retreat theory, this case evidenced dynamics more aligned with the general literature on state transformation. Therefore, with regards to collaborative environmental governance, it can be concluded, based on

this case, that whilst the UK austerity programme bore resemblance to state retreat, it was actually a more nuanced form of change and transformation in the normative role of the state in collaborative environmental governance.

The conclusions from this research challenge existing notions of the role of the state in normative collaborative environmental governance theory. These have implications for wider perceptions on the role that the state will play as a collaborative partner in sustainability transitions (see [40–42]). If, as reported here, austerity programmes have been creating distance between the state and its agencies with governance partners, then the state’s normative positionality as a partner on the transition towards greater sustainable development must be reconsidered. Therefore, the central contribution of this paper is to highlight how national programmes of austerity are likely to be disrupting the normative logics and practices of collaborative environmental governance and raise questions about the role post-austerity states might yet play in sustainability transitions. The consequences of these disruptions are that collaborative governance partners are likely to feel that the state should be decreasingly be seen as a collaborative partner or patron in the shared mission of environmental good governance.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Interview Schedule.

Ident.	Field	Sector	Grade	Org. Size
P1	Ecology	Independent	Senior	na
P2	Planning	Public	Middle	Large
P3	Ecology	Voluntary	Middle	Micro
P4	Farming	Voluntary	Middle	Micro
P5	Planning	Public	Senior	Large
P6	Ecology	Voluntary	Middle	Micro
P7	Ecology	Voluntary	Senior	Medium
P8	Landscape/heritage	Independent	Senior	na
P9	Ecology	Voluntary	Senior	Micro
P10	Ecology	Public	Middle	Small
P11	Ecology	Public	Senior	Medium
P12	Ecology	Voluntary	Senior	Micro
P13	Ecology	Voluntary	Senior	Medium
P14	Ecology	Public	Middle	Large
P15	Landscape/heritage	Voluntary	Middle	Micro Micro
P16	Landscape/heritage	Voluntary	Senior	Micro
P17	Arts	Voluntary	Middle	Micro
P18	Ecology	Voluntary	Senior	Medium
P19	Ecology	Voluntary	Senior	Micro
P20	Landscape/heritage	Voluntary	Middle	Large
P21	Government	Voluntary	Senior	Micro
P22	Government	Voluntary	Junior	Micro
P23	Ecology	Voluntary	Senior	Micro
P24	Planning	Voluntary	Senior	Small
P25	Landscape/heritage	Voluntary	Middle	Large
P26	Marine	Voluntary	Senior	Micro
P27	Marine	Public	Senior	Medium
P28	Ecology	Public	Middle	Medium
P29	Landscape/heritage	Voluntary	Senior	Large
P30	Planning	Public	Senior	Large
P31	Ecology	Voluntary	Middle	Large
P32	Ecology	Voluntary	Senior	Medium

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